

Marshall Islands

October 9—October 19, 2005

Susan and I got up at 3:20 AM Monday morning to be at the airport in Bangkok, Thailand, in time to catch the flight to the Marshall Islands which only goes there three times a week from Thailand. We told Deanna Richardson and Chelsea Vegter, the missionaries, to go back home and go to sleep. There was no need for them to lose most of the night's sleep since we could wait alone for the flight. We checked in, found a restaurant and got some coffee to help us stay awake. It was so potent; I didn't enjoy it at all.

The flight was on time to Tokyo, Japan, (a very modern airport) where we had a layover that was about 6 hours. After finding our gate we went to a restaurant near the gate and got some ice cream. It really tasted good. Then we walked around and found a bookstore where Susan bought C.S. Lewis's book, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, to read on the flight. There were other Christian selections as well. When it was near the time for our flight to Guam my name was called. When I went to the desk, I was given a free seat upgrade to business class. I asked if Susan, my friend, could move up, too; she had also been chosen. It was really a blessing arranged by the Lord because we still had about 20 hours or so to go before we reached our destination. We got a full meal, which by now we really needed.

Monday

On the flight with us was a group of National Guard Corp of Engineers. They were returning from an assignment in Afghanistan for some R&R (rest and relaxation). I was seated directly across the aisle from the one who got an upgrade. He lived in Guam. I thanked him for the job they were doing to keep our country safe. The pilot announced they were on board so the whole flight applauded them.

When we arrived in Guam, (the airport is large and modern) it was the middle of the night. We were exhausted so we found our gate and tried to get a few winks of sleep. I finally sat down on the floor and put my neck pillow on the seat (like I had my students to in grade school) and got a little sleep. One girl had a piece of plastic that she spread on the floor and lay down on that.

We finally boarded for the Marshall Islands. At our first stop, which was Truk Island, a young guy from Springfield, Missouri got on. He was wearing a lei (a necklace of flowers) and a lei (a band of flowers for the head). He sat down beside me and we got into several conversations during the almost six hours he was on the flight. He had graduated from Drury College, a Christian college in Springfield. He had friends from Evangel University. He had been with the Peace Corp for two years and was just returning home for a visit with his family after signing for another year. He knew much about the culture so told me about the chain of islands (correctly known as atolls).

At each new island or islet, the plane landed and let off passengers as it took on new ones. The airports were very primitive and had no air conditioning. We could have gotten off but would have had to take our luggage if we had. That was too tiring. We had to move it to the other side of the plane. This was a totally unnecessary search (that is how the passengers viewed it). We had already been ex-rayed and our bags inspected before we boarded. On the fourth island was a military installation where no one was allowed to deplane. We let off and took on passengers. After four stops and the same procedures, we finally landed at Majuro, the fifth and final stop. The Clarks, (Shawn and Steve) and a former senator's wife, Marilyn, were there to greet us in the typical Marshallese custom. Marilyn's husband had been killed in an automobile accident a few years early. They brought necklaces, bracelets and flowers made from shells and coconut by products. They were beautiful.

When we got to the apartment, which is above the Bible School, Shawn had a delicious dinner of chicken tetrazoni. She is an excellent cook and hostess. I had met her at Cypress Cathedral many years ago but did not really know her except through a mutual friend. Steve had helped with Vacation Bible School as a teenager. They have three boys. Travis is the oldest and Steve is in the middle. Richard is their youngest. He had some problems from birth but is a very intelligent and loving child who really likes books. Steve told me he took the Word Pastor Quentin Edwards preached and stood on it for the child's healing. Travis is the kid of fun and action and Steve is the one who wants to be sure all is well, while Richard is the entertainer and hugger. We stayed up and talked a while but since we had not had any sleep for 20 plus hours we went to bed. They gave us their bedroom which was very comfortable. It had fans and the air conditioner from the other room helped cool it. We slept late the next day since classes didn't start until 2:00 PM.

Tuesday

We had breakfast and a light lunch before the workshop began. Starting with 13 ladies, others came as the week progressed. They came from several churches and ministries. One was from a church on another atoll. Steve picked up one end of the island and Shawn the other. We went with Shawn the first day. Most of the ladies could sew and several brought their sewing machines. Marilyn came to interpret but it was not necessary since there was only one lady who needed explanations in Marshallese at times. She understood some English. Most conversed freely with us. Their language, we were told, only has about 1,000 words in it.

The first day of the workshop was devoted mostly to cutting out and gluing the puppet heads and bodies together so they would dry completely before having to be turned. Since the weather is tropical, they were best left over night. We left the air conditioning on over night to be sure.

We were still in jet lag. We got showers and when Shawn and Steve came back from taking people home, we helped with dinner. Afterwards we enjoyed a long evening of

catching up on what had been going on during the years that I had not seen Steve. They educated us on some of the culture and history of the Marshall Islands.

The Marshall Islands consists of a chain of Islands in Asia. Although the island is tropical there are periods when there is little or no rainfall. During those times water has to be conserved. The faucet can't be left running when rinsing dishes and showers have to be limited as well as flushing the commode only when necessary.

It is one of the only places in the world where black coral is found. It is crime to take any off the island for any reason. Shells are in abundance and very beautiful. Black pearls are also found there.

The nation is a Christian nation. Most are Protestant and the larger group seems to be Pentecostal. They have the biggest buildings and some have schools. There are several Spirit-filled churches scattered up and down the island.

Majuro is only 33 miles long and at the widest point only a mile wide. In places the Pacific Ocean is on one side and the coral reef is on the other with only enough land for a two lane road between. The ocean view is breathtaking. The climate is tropical the year round and the islands are about 2200 miles from any land mass. There is, except tourism and fishing, not much opportunity to make a living. The country is a protectorate of the USA. They have coconut, bread fruit, bananas and delicious fish. The boys explained that the coconut is used in its three stages and tastes different-ni, wini and you. The "you" stage is what we usually have in the USA for making desserts.

The people are mostly very short and tend to be plump. They are always clean and have no body odor. When we finally broke the ice, we could see how loving, friendly and generous the people really were. Those involved in politics are the royalty and the rest are lower class. The typical Marshallese lady wears a long dress that looks like our old fashioned muumuus of the sixties era. They are colorful and very diverse in style and fabric.

The lush vegetation and flowering trees make it a paradise of sorts. Everyone keeps their place neat outside and most have above ground burial places on their property. The coral is too hard to dig graves in most places. The sites are mostly well kept and many have flowers on them. Funerals last several days because they have to wait until all relatives are there to proceed. Some live as far away as the United States. Food has to be provided and even people have to be helped with plane tickets. Funerals can be very expensive.

Wednesday

We got up about 8:15 AM dressed and ate. After devotions, Shawn, Susan and I went to the Marshall Islands Resort for a buffet lunch. They served a variety of soups, salads and sandwiches allowing you to "make your own lunch". There were several dessert choices as well. Leaving there we stopped at a place they called "Wal-Mart" where all sorts of items from furniture to electronics can be purchased.

Next we picked up the ladies for class. It was an especially overcast and rainy day and we had forgotten to take umbrellas.

Class began with the sewing and stuffing of arms, heads and shoulders. Others had to glue what was not completed on Tuesday. Amazingly, the ladies caught on very quickly and needed very little help. Shawn made desserts for every class meeting and served pineapple Tang, which I haven't seen here.

We finished up dinner while Steve and Shawn took the people home. After dinner we watched a video and made banana splits. We went to bed late as usual.

Thursday

We slept later and when we did get up had breakfast and rested. Shawn home schools her boys and another young man from up the road. They begin about 8:00 and finish before lunch.

Most were near completing their puppets at the end of the day but clothing still had to be made. One lady, who was from the Salvation Army, had to go to the hospital. She missed about two days. They thought she had a heart attack but thankfully she didn't. Again while the ladies were being taken home we finished dinner. After dinner we enjoyed some more fellowship.

Friday

Friday began as usual. The ladies had gotten rides and did not have to be picked up. Some who had missed class came back and we played catch up so that we could complete all the puppets on time. Eyes were glued on and they decided how they wanted their puppet to look and added hair. This was a long tedious process. This is what makes the different age levels, personality types and individuality for the puppet. Everyone worked until about 7:00 PM.

They had brought food and gifts so had a Marshallese dinner party for us to show their appreciation. All the food was typical of what they eat and very good. We had fish, chicken seasoned with cinnamon, steak cut very thin and cooked well done. There was their version of potato salad and slaw, banana stuffed with a sweet rice mixture, white rice, fried bananas, raw ladyfinger bananas, raw bread fruit and a special coconut drink called IQ. We had Pepsi.

Then they sang 2 or 3 Marshallese songs for us as one lady played the ukulele. Then the gifts were distributed among the women and each one brought them to the front and either laid them on the table or put the jewelry on us. They gave us a purse (made locally, like Jackie Kennedy Onassis had bought there and carried on one of her television appearances). It opened on the end rather than in the front.

The oldest of the ladies (78 years) was chosen to make the speech thanking us for coming to teach. Marilyn, the master of ceremonies) interpreted for her. The celebration ended late but we still had our conversation time with the Clarks after it all ended.

Saturday

Exhaustion had overtaken us so we slept late. After breakfast we went sightseeing. First, we stopped at the food festival near downtown. The ambassadors and senators were there seated outside in boiling heat. Some men got up and gave us seats. All was being said in Marshallese so we left after a while. We had not taken many pictures so were able to get shots of some of the beautiful places we had passed. Next, we went to the Salvation Army where the ladies gave us the dresses they made for us and we visited with Marty, Nancy and Josiah, the Captain and his wife and son, for a while. They have a vision to get boats for all the pastors on the smaller atolls. He had plans to populate an island where no one lives with pigs to increase the food supply.

Lunch was at the Tide Table, owned by Americans. We had hamburgers, fries and drinks. After shopping for souvenirs, we picked up a local lady who knew where to go so we bought some things that they had not given us. We went to several places and then to the grocery store for ice cream before returning to the apartment. Shawn made Ramin noodles that she had added to and banana bread that was the best I have ever eaten. We talked a while before going to bed.

Sunday

We awoke early Sunday feeling more rested, ate breakfast and got dressed for church. It began about 10:30 and was over about 12:30. They began with praise and worship followed by a teen trio of girls. Next, an ensemble of teen boys sang. Then the youth choir sang. The pastor is one of the most educated pastors in the area. He formerly taught at the Assemblies of God Bible School. Presently, he has a thriving, alive and growing church filled with youth, who need Sunday school literature. We were introduced and invited back to share 10 minutes in the night service. Then Pastor Ronald preached. A guy from the church came up to interpret for us but I was too far away to get much of it.

Near the end Shawn sent for me to come because I wanted to see their puppet show for the children who were in Children's church. Marilyn is the leader. She uses a team from her church to help with the 100 or so kids. Even being a rainy day they met outside. There was only a roof over the area and mats on the ground to sit on.

The pastor's wife and daughter had been in the workshop. He began the church with 6 people about 8 or 10 years ago and now has 200 to 300, most of who live in the neighborhood surrounding the church.

After church we went to the Tide Table again to eat lunch. Susan and I treated for lunch since Shawn had cooked all week.

We were able to go back to the apartment for a short time of rest before the evening service which was dedicated to Children's ministry. I greeted and encouraged the church. Then they had Susan and me stand up front and showered us with more local island gifts. Susan was given an outrigger boat and I was given a crab, both made from coconut shells. The service was about 3 ½ hours, with samples of the various lessons being taught for the past month, followed by food after church. Some of the church leaders went and got hamburgers, fries and cokes for us since they thought we may not enjoy their food. They had chicken soup with rice and Marshallese donuts, which would have been just fine.

We got home very late and were happy to go to bed.

Monday

The ladies came on Monday morning to finish the puppets and clothing and to get pictures of their productions. It was exciting to see how they proudly presented their creations for the pictures. One young lady said her husband had a goatee and made her puppet with one as well as a bald spot on the back of his head. Another made her puppet with grey hair like an old man. Yet another made a typical Marshallese girl with long, thick black hair. Others made girl puppets and some boy puppets. Susan made a dark heart to represent evil. Among the participants were Virginia, Cynthia, Marilyn, Frederia, Rita, Previa, Amenia, Enrena, Betalina, Magdalena, Hannah and Fay.

Shawn fixed chicken and rice for lunch and served everyone. It is improper not to feed guests who are with you during lunch time. Finally everyone was delivered home but before we left for the airport, some of them returned with live flower wots for us to wear on the plane. Steve and Shawn felt we got all this attention because we connected so well with them. We had a wonderful time and made many new friends but, most importantly, we will affect lives of children for eternity because now they have a vehicle to use to make a greater impression on children for God.

We finished packing and the boys loaded our luggage into the van so we would not be late getting to the airport. Shawn fixed dinner but we were too full from lunch and couldn't eat. Steve and Shawn took us to the airport and we got checked in. We said our good byes. There was no need for them to wait as the flight was scheduled to be on time. It was hot and stuffy and we welcomed the boarding time.

We were soon on our way to Honolulu. We arrived there in the middle of the night. Steve had booked us a hotel room where he and Shawn had stayed near the airport that has shuttle service. All we had to do was call the hotel after we had gone through customs and they sent a shuttle right away to pick us up. At the front desk, we were told we had another whole day before we could get our flight to the USA. The desk clerk gave us a discounted room for another night. We slept late so were much more rested for the flight when we left. Leaving the room, we went to the dining room for a late lunch. Next, we inquired about a shopping area so we could get some cheaper food for

the next morning and snacks for the flight since there would be no food service. They directed us to a K-Mart and told us which bus to take to get there and which to take to get back to the hotel. Susan had noticed a fast food place when we went to get on the bus so we went there later that evening for milkshakes. The misunderstanding was costly but restful for us. We had two Mondays that week. This is because of crossing the International Date Line.

Tuesday

We awoke Tuesday after a good night's rest and had our pop tarts and coffee for breakfast and got ready to catch the shuttle to the airport. We got checked in with the help of a very polite skycap and found our gate. The downside of travel is the long amounts of time spent in the airport waiting for the flight. Finally we boarded, on time, for Los Angeles. There we had another long, long walk to the next gate and another long wait. It was early morning when we finally arrived in Orlando and were picked up by Rev. Jimmy Merritt. We got back to Winter Haven about 7:45 in the morning and as soon as I was able to get my dirty clothes into the washer and then to the dryer, I went to bed and slept all day. I got up in time for Wednesday night church.